

TCAD for PV: A fast method for accurately modelling metal impurity evolution during solar cell processing

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ABSTRACT

Coupled device and process simulation tools, collectively known as technology computer-aided design (TCAD), have been used in the integrated circuit industry for over 30 years. These tools allow researchers to quickly converge on optimized device designs and manufacturing processes with minimal experimental expenditures. The PV industry has been slower to adopt these tools, but is quickly developing competency in using them. This paper introduces a predictive defect engineering paradigm and simulation tool, while demonstrating its effectiveness at increasing the performance and throughput of current industrial processes. The impurity-to-efficiency (I2E) simulator is a coupled process and device simulation tool that links wafer material purity, processing parameters and cell design to device performance. The tool has been validated with experimental data and used successfully with partners in industry. The simulator has also been deployed in a free web-accessible applet, which is available for use by the industrial and academic communities.

Introduction: why simulate metal impurities?

Computer simulation has transformed industries by allowing rapid, low-cost design iterations during product development. The photovoltaic industry has benefited from device simulators for over 25 years: some early examples include PC1D [1,2], AMPS-1D [3,4], and SCAPS [5,6]. These tools, especially PC1D, continue to have a large influence on the photovoltaics industry. While existing device simulators achieve their intended purpose, an integrated approach that considers the interdependency of processing and performance is superior. Technology computer-aided design (TCAD) tools provide these integrated capabilities. Initial codes were written over 30 years ago and tailored to specific applications in the semiconductor industry [7,8]. The PV industry has lagged behind the integrated circuit industry in the application of process modelling, but interest has recently increased with the availability of commercial packages targeting photovoltaics [9,10]. However, care must be taken when adapting existing tools, designed for the integrated circuit industry, to the PV industry, because of the inherently higher defect densities present in solar-grade silicon material.

The optimization of the time-temperature profile of phosphorus diffusion gettering (PDG) (Fig. 1) presents a useful application of process modelling [11]. In the as-grown wafer, many metal impurities are distributed inhomogeneously as interstitial point defects, found throughout the wafer, and metal-silicide precipitates, found mainly

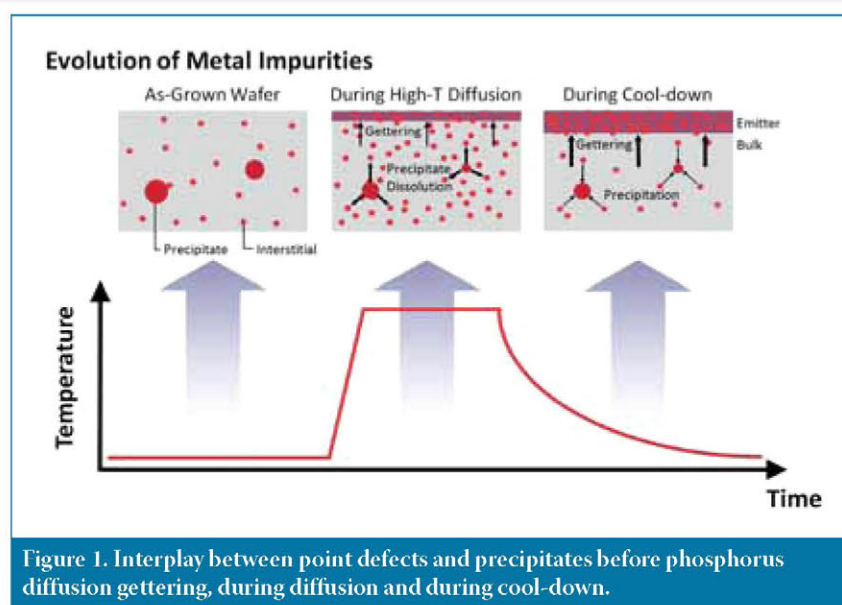
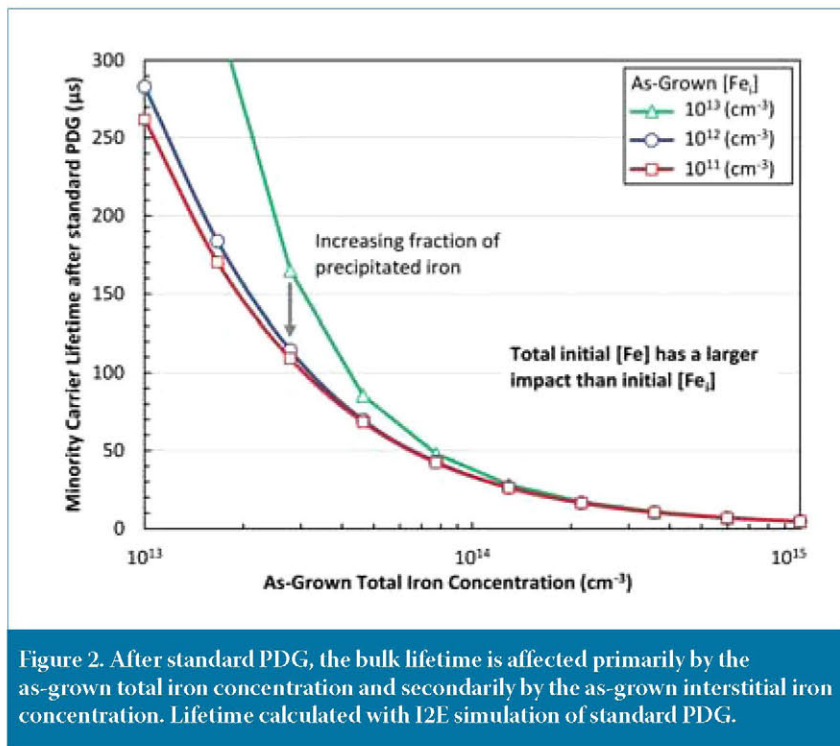


Figure 1. Interplay between point defects and precipitates before phosphorus diffusion gettering, during diffusion and during cool-down.

at structural defects such as dislocations and grain boundaries [12,13]. During the high-temperature plateau and cool-down of PDG, most interstitial metals – e.g. Cu, Fe and Cr – diffuse and segregate to the phosphorus-rich layer, because these species have a higher effective solubility in the *n*-type region than in the *p*-type bulk [14,15]. This decreases the bulk interstitial concentration below the solubility limit at the process temperature, causing metal precipitates to dissolve. The newly dissolved interstitial atoms can then diffuse to the emitter, driving further precipitate dissolution. By the end of the process, PDG generally reduces both total and interstitial metal concentrations and thereby increases cell performance. But the effectiveness of the gettering step critically

depends on the time-temperature profile, and in particular on the cool-down rate, because the segregation coefficient, the ratio of the bulk and emitter solubilities, and the diffusivity of metal point defects are strong functions of temperature.

The PDG process must be optimized to address both the total concentration and the distribution of metal impurities for maximum improvement of minority carrier lifetime [14,16–18]. For example, total as-grown iron concentration is a better predictor of lifetime after gettering than the interstitial as-grown concentration (Fig. 2) [19]. Iron is of particular interest in silicon solar cells because it is typically the performance-limiting defect in as-grown materials [17,20]. Additionally, the concentration



of total iron, especially in cast silicon materials, can be orders of magnitude higher than the interstitial iron concentration [21]. The concentration of interstitial iron can be measured with relative ease by flash or thermal dissociation of Fe-B pairs and subsequent re-measurement of the minority carrier lifetime [22]. The total iron concentration, however, including both dissolved and precipitated iron, is more difficult (and costly) to measure, because metal concentrations are often at or below the detection limits of readily available mass-spectroscopy methods.

In a material with high total iron concentrations, for example wafers extracted from the top or borders of an ingot, large metal-silicide precipitates

cannot be completely dissolved in many gettering processes, and act as recombination-active defects and sources of interstitials during subsequent high-temperature processing [23,24]. Additionally, standard gettering processes are less effective in multicrystalline silicon (mc-Si) than in monocrystalline silicon (mono-Si), as dislocations and grain boundaries impede the effective extraction of metal impurities in mc-Si material [25–27]. This contributes to the relatively low efficiencies of mc-Si devices compared to mono-Si [28].

The impurity-to-efficiency (I2E) simulator – a coupled device and process TCAD tool – has been developed to address the challenges of optimizing the time-temperature profile of solar cell

processing to specific distributions and concentrations of iron in as-grown wafers [29]. This paper presents a description of the I2E simulator, a demonstration of the effectiveness of predictive defect engineering in industrial applications, and a discussion of the online implementation of the tool.

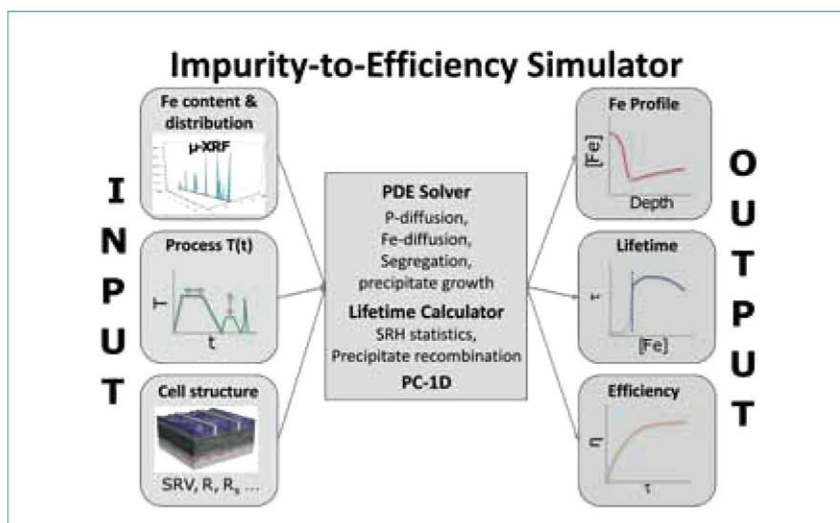
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Method: predictive defect engineering

The I2E simulation tool has been developed to predict the impact of as-grown iron impurities on final solar cell performance as a function of device processing conditions and cell architecture (Fig. 3) [29]. The I2E simulator operates in 1D to capture the essential physics of iron interstitial gettering and precipitate dissolution with minimum computational expense, and is a compactly packaged deployment of previous simulation efforts [24,30–34]. The simulator consists of three components:

- A kinetic model for the diffusion and segregation of iron point defects, as well as iron-silicide precipitate dissolution and growth, during high-temperature solar cell processing.
- Minority carrier lifetime calculator as a function of both interstitial and precipitated iron concentration using a Shockley-Read-Hall recombination model for the iron interstitial concentration and an effective surface recombination value at iron-silicide precipitate and silicon interfaces.
- The industry standard 1D device simulator, PC1D, to determine device performance as a function of the device architecture, the calculated charge carrier lifetimes and the calculated phosphorus emitter profile [1,2].

The kinetic simulator requires the solution of three coupled non-linear partial differential equations [29]. The system of



equations contains steep concentration gradients and fast-moving fronts which are unstable with many numerical methods [35,36]. A solution algorithm was developed that can reliably solve the system of equations and supports the complete dissolution of precipitates. The algorithm generates an optimized spatial mesh distribution for the device. Execution times for practical problems range from 30 seconds to 30 minutes and depend strongly on the resolution of the mesh and complexity of the time-temperature profile. The simulator has been validated through comparisons with experimental data for gettering in mono-Si and mc-Si wafers [29].

Results: improvements guided by predictive defect engineering

The I2E simulator has been successfully employed to optimize cell processing conditions with academic and industrial partners. The success described below demonstrates the potential of predictive defect engineering and the significant performance improvements that can be realized through tailoring processing conditions to specific material qualities.

Process tailoring to specific impurity levels

Approximately half of the wafers produced by ingot casting contain some portion of so-called 'red zones' – regions of low minority carrier lifetime from high residual iron concentrations [37]. A few centimetres of 'red zone' material near the crucible wall are removed from the ingot prior to brick and wafer sawing, as the lifetime typically fails to improve during standard solar cell processing. A low-temperature anneal (LTA) was applied following phosphorus diffusion, to improve the gettering of residual iron. Results of the standard and optimized processes are shown in Fig. 4. Optimized phosphorus diffusion not only improved the minority carrier lifetime over the entire ingot, but also increased the lifetime of the bottom 10% of the ingot to an acceptable value, resulting in a yield increase. In the future, predictive simulation may be employed to optimize solar cell processing for different regions of the ingot, which have specific distributions and concentrations of iron [19].

P-diffusion co-optimization of bulk lifetime and throughput

Cell manufacturers must optimize their manufacturing lines for both device performance and throughput, while accounting for varying impurity levels. Simulations were conducted for an industrial partner to optimize the hold temperature, plateau time and cooling time of a PDG gettering step for both bulk minority carrier lifetime and throughput. Many researchers have found that

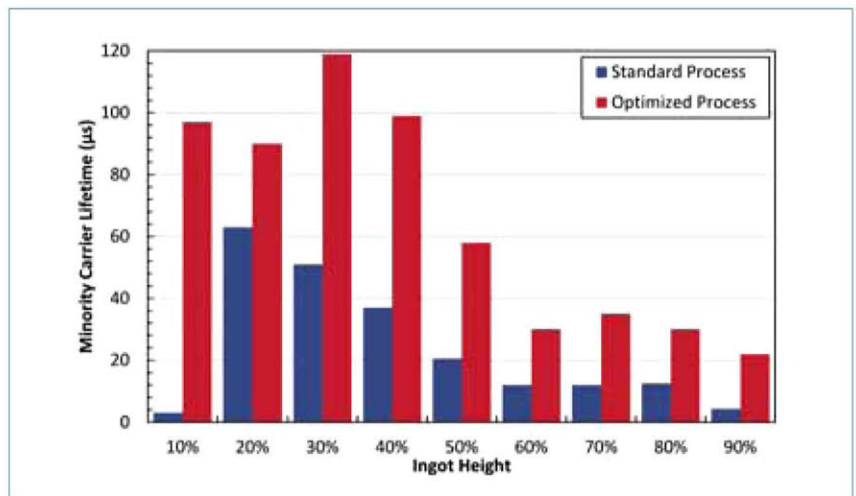


Figure 4. Industrial application: increased ingot yield and material quality through process tailoring to specific impurity levels [38].

extending PDG, by slow cooling or LTA, can improve lifetime by reducing the concentration of interstitial iron [39–44]. More recently, it has been shown that a shorter anneal at lower temperatures can achieve much of the lifetime improvement of extended LTAs by forcing segregation of iron to the external gettering layer [45]. Learning from these previous efforts, in the current study the balance between extending the high-temperature hold time and/or the cooling time was investigated.

I2E simulations were performed to co-optimize lifetime and throughput (Fig. 5). The initial total iron concentration was $3 \cdot 10^{13}$ atoms/cm³, with 10% of the iron present as Fe-B pairs [46] and the remainder homogeneously distributed as 20nm-radius precipitates [23,47]. First, the standard process of our industrial partner was simulated. Next, attempts were made to shorten the standard process while maintaining the existing hold temperature. Although the total

process time was reduced in these cases, the lifetime provided was insufficient for acceptable device performance. Finally, an I2E optimized process was suggested that provided a sufficient bulk minority carrier lifetime for our industrial partner, while doubling throughput.

Reduction in interstitial iron concentration after contact co-firing

To date, significant efforts have been made to optimize the time-temperature profile of PDG to reduce the impact of lifetime-limiting impurities in mc-Si material. In contrast, little attention has been paid to optimizing the time-temperature profile of contact firing in order to control metal impurities, despite it being the final high-temperature step of the solar cell fabrication process and the last opportunity to manipulate the metal impurity distribution. Contact firing is usually carried out at peak temperatures between 800°C and 900°C, and is therefore

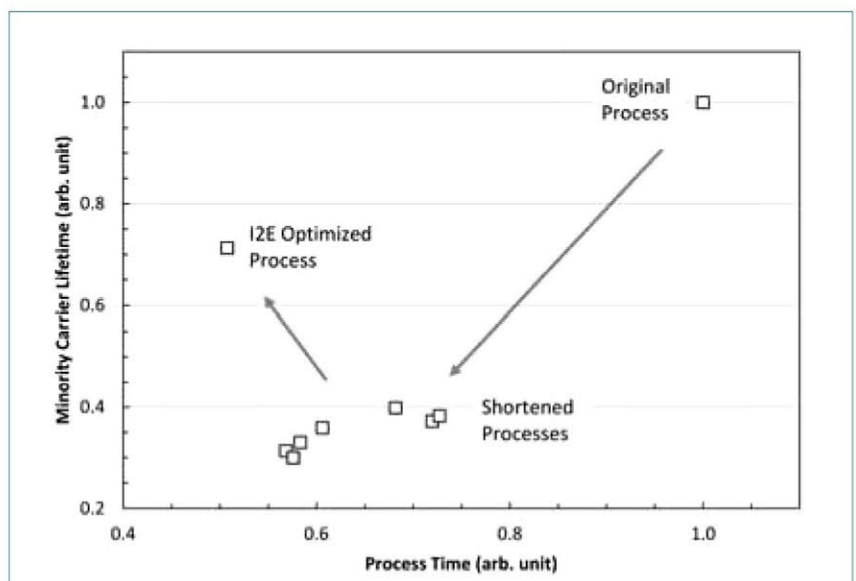


Figure 5. Industrial application: P-diffusion co-optimization of bulk lifetime and throughput.

likely to produce the partial dissolution of metal precipitates, which can offset the reduction in concentration of dissolved impurities achieved during PDG [41,48].

The dissolution and gettering of iron during the co-firing step (Fig. 6) was examined with the I2E simulation tool [49]. First, a standard time-temperature profile of the co-firing step was simulated for a typical iron concentration and distribution in a P-diffused mc-Si wafer. Simulations were carried out for two different peak temperatures, 800°C and 900°C, followed by a rapid cool-down to room temperature. Simulations predict that, after firing at $T_{\text{peak}} = 800^\circ\text{C}$, the interstitial iron concentration remains constant (see blue bars in Fig. 6). After firing at $T_{\text{peak}} = 900^\circ\text{C}$, however, an increased interstitial iron concentration is predicted, indicating that the dissolution of iron precipitates increases at a higher temperature.

“Experimental results confirm that a standard firing step can lead to material degradation, whereas material performance can be maintained or even enhanced during an extended firing step optimized with I2E.”

Second, I2E simulations were performed to optimize the cool-down profile of the firing step to allow for effective gettering of Fe_i atoms to the P-diffused layer. Simulation results suggest that an *extended* firing step, including an additional low-temperature plateau of less than 2 minutes, results in a lower interstitial iron concentration than the standard firing step for both peak

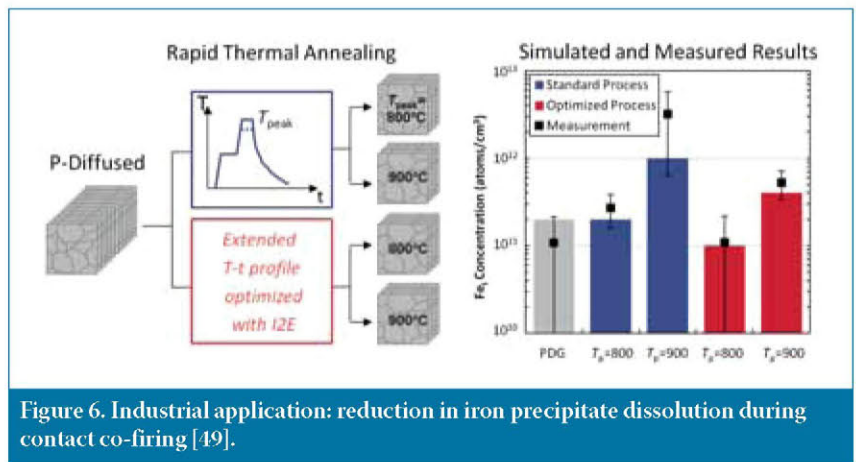


Figure 6. Industrial application: reduction in iron precipitate dissolution during contact co-firing [49].

temperatures (see red bars in Fig. 6). For $T_{\text{peak}} = 800^\circ\text{C}$, an extended firing step can even result in further reduced interstitial iron concentrations after standard PDG.

Simulated trends are confirmed by experimental results, shown as black dots in Fig. 6. Several sets of p-type mc-Si wafers were P-diffused using a standard process, then divided into four groups and subjected to peak temperatures of 800°C or 900°C while following a standard firing or extended firing profile in a rapid thermal annealing (RTA) furnace. Interstitial iron concentrations and electron lifetimes were measured on P-diffused and fired wafers [49]. Experimental results confirm that a standard firing step can lead to material degradation, whereas material performance can be maintained or even enhanced during an extended firing step optimized with I2E.

Discussion: online tool implementation

The simulator has been deployed in a free web-accessible applet [50], which is available for use by the industrial and academic communities. The applet's user

interface, shown in Fig. 7, allows users to configure simulations and interpret output data. Required inputs to the tool include the time-temperature profile used during cell fabrication, the as-grown total and interstitial iron concentrations in the wafer, and the average precipitate radius. Impurity concentrations can be estimated from the ingot location of the wafer, or measured using a combination of Fe-B dissociation and mass-spectrometry methods such as ICP-MS [51]. Precipitate radius can be estimated as described in the literature [18,23]. Though only needed to simulate device performance, cell architecture is defined by a PC1D parameter (.prm) file.

The applet communicates with a dedicated high-performance server (maintained by the MIT Photovoltaic Research Laboratory in Cambridge) that carries out all calculations all input and output files after results are printed to the user. The applet was initially made available to a user group of approximately 80 individuals. Over 1300 simulations have now been performed during the first three months of operation, with users concentrated in North America, Europe and Asia.

Conclusions

The effectiveness of predictive defect engineering while using the I2E simulation tool has been demonstrated. This tool has benefited the photovoltaic community by providing the information necessary for understanding the interplay between material purity, processing parameters, cell design and device performance. Through the work carried out on this project, it has been concluded that significant performance and throughput improvements can be realized by tailoring processing conditions to specific material qualities. Additionally, the I2E tool allows a rapid optimization of existing processes and the identification and evaluation of new approaches with minimal expenditures. Readers are encouraged to explore problems of interest with the online implementation of the tool.

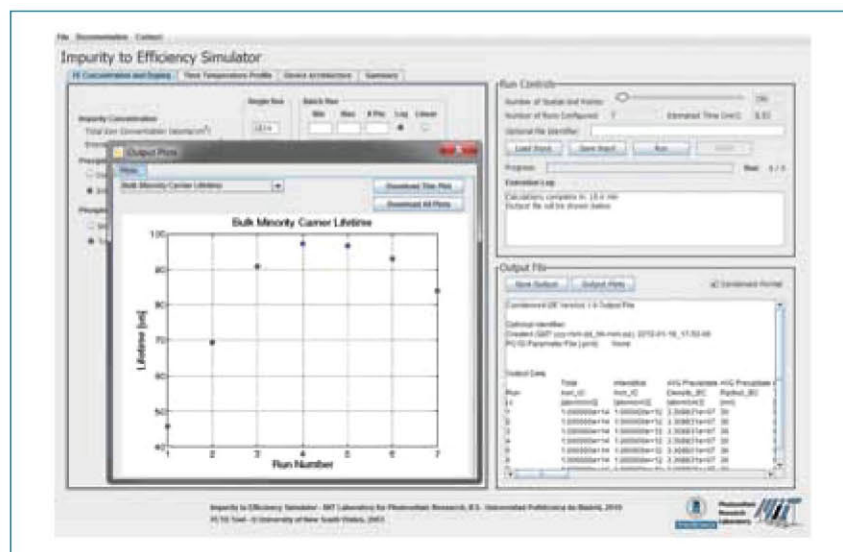


Figure 7. I2E simulator screenshot after calculations are complete: a plot of the results is shown, as well as an output text file.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the U.S. Department of Energy (Contract No. DE-FG36-09GO1900), the MIT Deshpande Center, the MIT-Spain/La Cambra de Barcelona Seed Fund and the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación (through Thincells Project No. TEC2008-06798-C03-02). The authors thank N. Stoddard and R. Sidhu, who collaborated in the study leading to the results presented in Fig. 4. In addition, D.M. Powell acknowledges the support of the Department of Defense through the NDSEG fellowship programme, and D.P. Fenning acknowledges the support of the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship.

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